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Jane Jordan & Andrew King (eds.). *Ouida and Victorian Popular Culture*. Farnham, UK & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. xiv, 234 p. ill. (hardback). ISBN: 9781409405894. £60.

This collection of nine essays opens up new ground to scholars working both on Ouida and in related fields, including: popular fiction, print history, gender, comparative literature, and the European reception of British novelists. While Andrew King's introduction observes wryly that "[b]elittling Ouida became a reflex in the early twentieth century" (3), this is more than simply a recovery project on an unjustly side-lined Victorian author. The selection and arrangement of essays (under the headings "Rereading Ouida", "Rewriting Ouida", and "Ouida and Politics") creates a tissue of connecting themes, constituting a challenge to the reader to look again at Ouida's prodigious but apparently "ephemeral" output.

As King notes in his survey of her career, "Ouida's fictional world of the 1880s is one where ... tactically deployed wit has no long-term strategy in an endless battle of words. ... the very bleakness and rigour of her vision constitutes a challenge to the reader" (26). In her complementary essay on "Ouida and the Canon", Pamela K. Gilbert notes that we need to get beyond "the strong-woman-character litmus test" that has haunted non-canonical texts in recent decades, and instead "find a mode of reading that fully respect[s] the complexities" of women writers outside the Great Tradition (39) – a rallying call that is taken up by other contributors. Jane Jordan's exploration of male friendship in Ouida's fiction, for instance, offers a nuanced and provocative account of how she "pushes the culturally legitimate boundaries of romantic friendship to their limit" (68), in contradistinction to the overtly homoerotic literature of the *fin de siècle*.

Later essays explore the influence of stage adaptation, intertextuality and literary reviewing on Ouida's career. Both Hayley Jayne Bradley and Sondeep Kandola use the theme of "changing the plot" to ask questions about Ouida's place in the literary market. Bradley challenges the cliché of the hack dramatist who plunders popular novels for quick adaptation, considering the effects of plot changes in both authorised and unauthorised stage adaptations of *Moths*; meanwhile Kandola's essay on Ouida's and Vernon Lee's aesthetic fiction explores Ouida's rewriting of the *Pygmalion* and *Galatea* myth as she "inventively models high art's governing myth to figure a woman artist as the principle agent of its ethical renovation" (99). Writing on Ouida and Corelli, Nickianne Moody discusses both authors' invidious assumption of genius, but concludes that their appeal derives from the reader's "license to pursue what is personally meaningful or culturally relevant ... Readers could appropriate, dismiss, expand and make connections beyond authorial intention" (128).

A number of the essays discuss Ouida's Italian writing in the context of both her literary aesthetic and her politics. In the final section on "Ouida and Politics", Diana Maltz mediates Ouida's anti-pacifist stance through her ambivalent response to the Russian Tolstoy, insightfully linking her "compassion for anarchists" (in opposition to the mainstream British press) to her "instinct for the theatrical" and her "customary defense of the downtrodden" (145). Addressing the modern reader, Lyn Pykett's coverage of Ouida's journalism reveals her sustained interest in a number of familiar topics, from environmentalism and the impact of new technologies on the pace of modern life, to degeneration, vivisection and women's rights. Little wonder that Richard Ambrosini, writing on Ouida's political aesthetic, terms her "an extraordinary reader of cultural signs" (176).

This consideration of Ouida and Victorian popular culture is meticulously researched and organised, and in its invitation to new modes of reading, brings renewed vitality to discussions of Ouida's achievement and that of her "popular" contemporaries.

Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton
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